

Demonstrate joining down ideas; teach students to take notes off their reading. Use numbering, Post-its, or index cards to organize evidence; consider ordinate and subordinate information. Lay out notes to look for patterns; consider which evidence supports theory.

realize that the great sea of facts they were accumulating fell into several clear categories. She used chart paper to name four categories that she thought students could recognize: the beliefs of the Native Americans, the attitudes of the Dutch colonists, facts about the land and climate, and the reasons the Dutch were colonizing New Amsterdam. As children collected their facts, they wrote them on adhesive notes or index cards and fastened them to the category on the appropriate chart paper. This physical act of categorizing information helped children see that writers don't plod down facts in a draft in whatever order they find them, but that writers are thoughtful and deliberate about where facts belong (see Chapter Seven).

When Aliza moved the students to literary essays, she did the same thing. She showed students that some information seems larger and more important, so that it becomes a category, and other information is grouped under it. She knew that sometimes students collect facts that don't fit into any category; some information is irrelevant or contradictory. Young students do not have practice with gathering facts and doing research and often find it difficult to assess information. They often are limited in ways they can find information and are not aware when facts seem unsubstantiated. Often what they do find is disjointed or irrelevant. Aliza decided to write a literary essay with them so she could show them what writers do when faced with each of these scenarios and show them that having found a fact doesn't mean it needs to be included. Writers are always thinking whether information fits their purpose, not about sticking everything in so they can squeeze out two pages of writing. Talking with students about their information can help give them a vision of what seems appropriate or what needs to be rearranged or left out.

## A Unit of Study in Literary Essays

It would be unusual to do this unit of study early in the year, because so much of the groundwork for it happens in reading workshop in the fall. Students must be very adept at talking and taking notes for you to schedule

As we saw in the book review unit of study, the teacher's focus must be on teaching something new every day of the study. It is so easy to say, "Oh, today they'll just catch up on some writing," or "I'll just do some confer-ring today instead of a minilesson," but this is not accountable teaching. Every day we must teach students something new and something that they can use again and again, long after this unit of study is over, long after this school year is over. Teachers must be wise, then, when choosing what to teach in each lesson. Ultimately, you are the wisest person for deciding

the same process and produce an essay on a book of their own choice. of four or five suggested topics from a read-aloud book. Then they will take their essays. In the end, students each will have produced an essay on one will walk students carefully through the planning, writing, and revising of group. The teacher's essay will serve as a model, and the daily minilesson but each child will write her own essay using the information from her groups," so that the idea building and evidence sharing is a group effort, teacher or located in their readers notebooks. Student will meet in "talk conversations they had on the read-aloud book, either provided by the sible ideas for their essays. These ideas will come from notes of previous book for her modeling, and the students will choose from a menu of pos- about her decision, the teacher will choose one idea from the read-aloud or chart paper, will heavily scaffold the students' writing. After talking read-aloud book. The teacher, who will write one also on a transparency

In this unit of study, students will each write an essay about a recent with them is essential. like. That's why walking through the process of writing a literary essay thing and the students have no vision of what that genre sounds or looks what you want them to do. Often teachers ask children to write some- write one essay together with the class to give them an idea of exactly actual student samples to use as mentor texts for teaching. You'll also some of my own and some student samples here. After that, you will have so you will have to write some yourself the first year. You can include lect samples of literary essays. Most are not written on children's levels, just as you did in the book review unit of study, you will need to col-

content areas, so they will have other opportunities to work in this genre. probably will ask them to write the same type of essay about their reading in essay as part of the independent writing work you require in the class. You repeat it again in the spring or to ask students to write at least one additional Let's assume you are doing this unit in the late winter and that you hope to several years of reading and writing workshop before coming to your room. this unit, though it certainly could happen earlier if your students have had

exactly what to teach your students, because you know them better than anyone, and you know their strengths and needs. So while I've given you a template for a unit of study, I strongly encourage you to modify or completely rewrite it to fit the needs of your class and to hold them to the highest possible standard. Ultimately you are the one who knows your writers best. You may want to slow down the study, but I would encourage you not to slow it down too much, as students tend to become tired of projects that take too long. Here is one possible way this study could go.

## Day 1

**TEACHING POINT** A literary essay pulls together one or more significant ideas that a reader has about one book or across several books. Essay writers get their ideas from a need to express some important truth they've discovered in a book or several books.

**MODELING** Looking back at a read-aloud book, the teacher rereads some of his notes and makes a list of some striking ideas. These should be familiar to the class, as the ideas were discussed together when reading the book. The teacher models on chart paper or transparency how to list his ideas, and then how he plans to think and talk about them. He wants to decide which idea he will stretch into a literary essay.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** From the list of ideas on the chart, the students talk to partners about which one might interest them to stretch out. The teacher listens to what several partnerships have said and uses this information to shape three or four ideas from the same read-aloud book. The teacher calls the class together again and writes these ideas on a new chart, "ideas we want to stretch out." (Some students may offer other ideas that can be added to the chart as well, provided they are ideas that will yield thinking and writing.)

**OFF YOU GO** The teacher sends students off to join talk groups, each based on a separate topic. Students choose which group to join to have a discussion of one idea from the chart. Tell students to push their discussion of the idea as far as they can, so that by the end of the discussion they have come to a new understanding of the idea.

**SHARE** Students should look over their notes in their readers notebooks to find anything they have written on the topic they chose to stretch.



## Day 2

**TEACHING POINT** Literary essays advance an idea and use literature to support the writer's stance.

**MODELING** The teacher thinks aloud about her idea and shows that as she thinks and talks, four or five chunks or categories of information become apparent to her. She writes each chunk on separate chart paper so she can add to them later.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students think about their group idea for a moment and imagine one possible category that might fit under their idea.

**OFF YOU GO** Students meet in their talk groups to decide on three to five categories or chunks of information under their topic. They write these on separate planning sheets or on separate pages in their writers notebooks.

**SHARE** Think about the chunks your group chose and be sure each one is equal in weight to the others.

## Day 3

**TEACHING POINT** Writers find evidence to support their ideas. They go back to the text to do this and to their notes. They keep records of the evidence they find.

**MODELING** The teacher takes one category from the previous day's charts and, skimming through the text, lists evidence and page numbers for each category.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students look over their planning sheets or the planning pages in their notebooks and decide which category they will find evidence for first.

**OFF YOU GO** Using notes they may have taken in their readers notebooks, or skimming the actual text, students gather and write down evidence for at least one chunk of information.

**SHARE** The talk groups meet to exchange and discuss information. They assign themselves more investigation if there is a category that has few examples of evidence or appears weak.

#### Day 4

**TEACHING POINT** Writers reflect on their notes as ways to grow new thinking or to ascertain where evidence is missing or weak.

**MODELING** The teacher looks at each of the chunks on his chart and writes a reflection on the bottom of one of them. He considers how his thinking has changed, the strength of the evidence, and how it relates to the main topic idea he started with. He also decides where and if he needs to collect more evidence.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students turn and talk to a partner about one of their planning sheets and what they are thinking about that category and the evidence they are collecting.

**OFF YOU GO** Students write reflections about each of the categories they have on their planning sheets.

**SHARE** Students reread their reflections and then act on anything that requires action. For example, they get more information or they try to find ways that the reflections connect to each other.

#### Day 5

**TEACHING POINT** Writers use their reflections to help them have new insights about their ideas and to plan more investigation or conversation.

**MODELING** The teacher chooses one of her categories to examine; she talks and writes about how it fits into her main idea and how it relates to the other categories on her charts. She may decide she needs to gather more information because one category is weak, or she needs to talk to someone else about this category because she is unsure about how it fits in with her main idea.

**TEACHING POINT** Writers organize their work before they write. One way to do this is to number the items inside the chunk and also to number the chunks in the order you will write them.

## Day 7

**SHARE** Students think about where else in their writing they might be able to use information they eliminated.

**OFF YOU GO** Students work alone and then meet in partnerships to decide which information to keep and which to eliminate. They lightly cross out information to be eliminated, because they might need that information again later.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students think about the main point of their essays and locate one category in their notebooks that they will read first in preparation for testing whether each fact belongs within the topic.

**MODELING** The teacher models rereading the categories he's written on charts, asking himself if each piece of information is worthwhile and relevant. He goes back and forth between his main idea and the chunks of information to do this. He deliberately will have written some information that needs to be taken out. He writes on a transparency that he takes out information that is weak, not connected strongly to the main idea, or that doesn't advance his stance. He talks about how he decides that something is worth keeping or needs eliminating, and that sometimes he is not sure and will mark it with a question mark.

**TEACHING POINT** Writers eliminate information that doesn't carry its weight; they make sure each category is equal in weight to the others.

## Day 6

**SHARE** Students will reread their chunks again to think about how they might want to put them in order.

**OFF YOU GO** Students reread each chunk they have written and think about how each fits in with the others and relates to the main idea.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students turn and talk to a partner about one of their categories and how it fits into their main idea.

Access Book Study

**MODELING** The teacher organizes the information inside each chunk and decides on an order for the chunks. She talks aloud about her rationale for choosing this order and marks her charts with numbers (or colored highlighters, or stars, or whatever). The rationale must include bringing the reader along from one sentence to the next so he understands the point the writer is trying to make.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students look at one of their categories and think about how they might arrange the information. They share this with a partner.

**OFF YOU GO** Students work alone to order the information in the categories and to decide on the order of the categories themselves. Students can cut up and rearrange the parts within each category and tape them together in the order they want.

**SHARE** Students share some of the thinking they did to decide on the order of the categories.

## Day 8

**TEACHING POINT** Writers reread their notes and clarify exactly what they want to say about their idea. Then they write a beginning that tells the reader right away what their essay is about.

**MODELING** The teacher shows two pieces of literature where the writers have informed the readers immediately what the piece is about. (You can use the first lines of *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen or *What You Know* First by Patricia MacLachlan, even though these books are not literary essays.) Then he clearly states the idea he wants to write about and composes a first line for his essay.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students turn to partners and say their idea in one sentence.

**OFF YOU GO** Students compose the first line of their drafts; then they continue to write their drafts.

**SHARE** Students complete the drafting of each category, except the conclusion, and work on transitions between categories.



**TEACHING POINT** Writers revise by making sure they have written with the correct tone for their piece. In a literary essay, the writer is the authority on the idea and the book. Writers choose precise language to show this.

## Day 11

**SHARE** Students who used quotes from the book must introduce their quotes in some way. Quotes cannot stand alone without explanation.

**OFF YOU GO** Students work to make their sentences flow smoothly and find other places where they need to do so.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Find a place in your draft where your sentences don't seem to work together and mark it.

**MODELING** The teacher revises his draft in one or two places where the sentences did not seem to flow into each other and the draft was choppy.

**TEACHING POINT** Writers revise their work. One way to revise is to make sure each sentence flows to the next, so the reader doesn't feel disconnected or doused with cold water.

## Day 10

**SHARE** Students write another conclusion and decide which one is best in the context of their drafts.

**OFF YOU GO** During workshop, students will write conclusions that refer to their beginnings but that also draw new thinking from their evidence.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students talk with a partner about new thinking they have that grew from their evidence and that might belong in their conclusion.

**MODELING** The teacher rereads her draft and shows how her thinking has produced a conclusion that grows from the evidence.

**TEACHING POINT** Writers write conclusions that not only circle back to the beginning, but that also show the reader a new insight the writer has gotten from the evidence in the chunks.

## Day 9



**MODELING** The teacher demonstrates using one or two proofreaders' marks in her draft.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students reread a notebook entry and use one proofreaders' mark in it.

**OFF YOU GO** Students proofread their drafts and give them to the teacher for a final edit.

**TEACHING POINT** Writers proofread before sending their writing to their editor. They mark their drafts in a different color so they can see where the changes must be made.

## Day 13

**MODELING** The teacher models rereading his essay slowly to be sure it has the punctuation it needs.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students edit one sentence while still in the meeting area.

**SHARE** Students who used quotes from books must use quotation marks and indicate the page number of the quote.

## Day 12

**MODELING** The teacher demonstrates certain words she wants to add into her essay because she wants her writing to be clearer. She eliminates tentative or weak language, and she lists on a transparency other phrases she might use as she continues to revise.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students talk about some words to look for that are weak words, such as *nice*, *good*, and *bad*.

**OFF YOU GO** Students revise their drafts to change weak language to strong language to show their authority on their idea.

**SHARE** Students share one place where they changed a word to make their writing stronger.

**SHARE** Students think about the essay they wrote and prepare for reflection.

#### Day 14

**TEACHING POINT** Writers reflect on their writing and on themselves as writers.

**MODELING** The teacher reflects on his writing and what he thinks he might need to work on in the next writing piece.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students turn and talk with a partner about the experience of writing the literary essays and what they learned from it.

**OFF YOU GO** Students write a reflection in their writers notebooks about the experience of writing the essays, as well as what they learned and what they think they want to learn next.

**SHARE** Two students share what they want to become better at, such as organizing information or going from the planning sheet to the draft.

#### Day 15

**TEACHING POINT** Writers assign work to themselves as part of the writing life and as part of wanting to grow proficient at writing a genre.

**MODELING** The teacher shows her plans for writing another literary essay about a book that is not a class read-aloud. She uses her reflection from Day 14 to help her decide what she wants to focus on.

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT** Students look through their readers notebooks to decide which books they will write about next. They tell this to a partner.

**OFF YOU GO** Students begin to plan for the next literary essay, which will be an independent writing piece. They also plan for ways to make their current piece public, by putting them in a binder, on a database, or laminated cards in the classroom library.

**SHARE** Students share their plans for making their writing public and for writing their next essay.

**CELEBRATE!** Students meet in small groups to celebrate the literary essay they just finished writing. After that, the teacher begins the next unit of study.

It seems wise to ask students to practice writing another essay at this point. They have just gone through a heavily scaffolded study, and now they can attempt to write another essay so they begin to take ownership of writing essays. Students can follow the entire procedure again as they write an essay about another book they read on their own or with a partnership or book club.

### Using the Literary Essay to Promote Global Thinking

One reason for teaching literary essays is that children must learn to think about ideas and issues that appear in more than one text. Often many writers examine similar ideas, so children can find them in one text after another. Or one writer may return to the same issue again and again. After they have learned to look at ideas in one text, you can teach them to look for those same ideas in other books they may read or have already read. At PS 59 in Manhattan, students write about reading all year. The principal, Leslie Zackman, and her teachers decided that children were ready to show their abilities in a culminating writing activity at the end of the year. They designed an "Across Books Study," in which every child in the school wrote about an idea that appears in more than one text. While the requirements for kindergarten were very different from fifth grade, the idea of looking for an idea in more than one book really took hold. Even the youngest students realized that ideas live in many books, because books are about who we are and how we live. Some students found they could think about books in terms of themes and that books they had read in previous years could fit; this created a way for students to talk to each other about books between classes and between grades and to consider how there are often grand themes that are examined again and again in children's books. You might do something similar in your school if teachers were willing to plan vertically through the grades. Then the concept of looking at ideas in many different texts would be reinforced again and again. It also provides a cohesive way for students to grow their writing about texts throughout their elementary grades.

Literary essays are not easy for children to write, but they provide a wonderful opportunity for teaching organized thinking and stretching an idea about texts. Although we would not expect the youngest children to write them, there are other ways young children can be scaffolded to think about ideas in books so that they will be ready to consider the concept of seeing an idea across texts when they reach third or fourth grade. Modeling provides the best way to scaffold their learning, because they

## Summary

Probably even more important than this is teaching children that books should change their lives. In their book, *For a Better World* (2001), Randy and Katherine Bomer tell us that schools are not separate from the world and that we must use reading as a place to teach social justice and social action. It is very powerful, then, to think about what literary essays could do for students in terms of changing the way they see and live in the world. If children are writing about social justice and thinking about social action, then the work they do in reading and writing workshop can have far-reaching consequences for them. Examining social issues through books and organizing their thinking to write clearly and convincingly can have far-reaching effects on education and our society as a whole.

FIG. 6-1 How teachers arranged the "Across Books Study," with modifications for the youngest grades

Fifth grade	Four books in any genre
Fourth grade	Four books in the same genre
A literary essay about a theme and how it is treated in the four books.	
theme.	
A book review comparing the four books and how they treat the same	
about.	
An author profile focusing on an issue the author frequently writes	
how they connect.	
A booklet with two pages for each book, one page for a picture and the	
other for a summary of the book. At the end, write a paragraph about	
and a sentence on each page about how the books connect.	
A booklet with a picture about a book on each page	
connect.	
A poster with a picture of two books and a sentence about how they	
<b>Final Product</b>	